WELLINGTON SUPERCITY PROPOSAL

Risks to Accountability and Transparency in Local Government Reform

Briefing Note – 17 July 2026

Overview

As reported by RNZ on 17 July 2026, Wellington councils are advancing plans for a 'supercity' model — a merged Wellington-Wairarapa unitary council with one regional mayor and a layer of 'community councils' underneath. The proposal includes transferring responsibilities such as transport, large-scale planning, emergency management, rates, and flood protection to the regional level.

Councils have until 9 August 2026 to submit reorganisation proposals as part of the government's push to simplify local government and reduce duplication.

Accountability Risks in Amalgamation

Larger governance structures carry a real risk of diffusing responsibility for past decisions and failures. When multiple councils merge, it becomes easier to attribute previous underinvestment in infrastructure, poor hazard mapping practices, or lack of transparency to 'the old council' rather than current decision-makers.

Flood protection is explicitly listed as moving to the regional level in the Wellington proposal. This is significant given documented patterns of resistance to transparency on hazard mapping and infrastructure investment versus managed retreat pathways across multiple councils.

Transparency Concerns

The creation of 'community councils' with devolved powers over local services is presented as enhancing local voice. However, without strong transparency requirements and clear lines of accountability to ratepayers, these structures risk adding complexity while reducing effective public scrutiny — particularly on cross-boundary issues like flood protection and hazard management.

Wairarapa councils are still weighing whether to join the supercity or go alone, with concerns about losing local voice on the 'bigger table'. These are legitimate accountability questions that deserve open public debate before structural changes are locked in.

Broader Context

This Wellington proposal is occurring against a national backdrop of documented transparency failures: councils charging high fees or extending requests for information on hazard mapping impacts; the Reserve Bank confirming no guidance or analysis on lending practices for older and hazard-noted properties; and co-governance entities exercising influence with reduced public accountability.

Amalgamation without addressing these underlying transparency and accountability gaps risks entrenching problems rather than solving them.

Recommendation

Any supercity or amalgamation model should include explicit, enforceable transparency requirements for all decision-making bodies (including community councils), clear public reporting on hazard and infrastructure decisions, and mechanisms to prevent past failures from being obscured by structural change.

Ratepayers deserve genuine local voice and accountability — not larger, more opaque structures that make it harder to understand who is responsible for the decisions affecting their homes, insurance, and communities.

Source: RNZ, 'First details of Wellington supercity emerging', 17 July 2026. Full background materials on national transparency patterns available on request.